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ABSTRACT: This piece discusses the shift in the Christian Church’s soteriology from one of paradise to one of atonement. The implications of this change in theory extend into modern day issues like racial inequality and mental health stigma. Through understanding a theology of paradise, we can catch a glimpse of how differently our world might look.

Theology of Paradise Today

by Sarah Skrove

For many Christians today, a theology of paradise might sound foreign. The early Christian Church was deeply rooted in this theology of paradise, which informed their spirituality in a different way than modern day Christianity. In fairly recent history, the Christian Church has adopted a theology of atonement. This shift towards a theology of atonement brought about the affirmation of violence and oppression. As a result of this new theology, “Jesus no longer offered love and abundant life but judgment to be feared and suffering to be repeated by
The faithful.” The implications of atonement theology flow into current social issues including racial injustice and mental health stigma. A church focused on a theology of paradise today would have a different approach to racial inequalities and mental health support than our current social climate. There is hope within the theology of paradise for a world without stigma, judgement, or oppression.

In their book Saving Paradise, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker lay out a history of Christianity that uncovers the transition from a theology of paradise to a theology of atonement. In the early Christian Church, the faithful were focused on the beauty of a relationship with God and how the Spirit of God was alive and at work on Earth. Artwork from this time depicted lush landscapes of prosperity and growth. The first Christians held tight to this imagery as a representation of God’s generosity and as a matter of accountability. The theology of paradise existed not only as a reminder of the presence of God, but also as a reminder of the “ethical requirements of living in paradise.” Paradise acted as a description of what a Christ-centered life on Earth could look like, but also to provide a model of right and just lifestyles. Being rooted in paradise theology encouraged equality, support among communities, and held the love of God as their central motivation.

In the mid-700s, powerful Christian evangelists began to encounter other groups of people who held different beliefs than them. These Christians claimed it as their mission to convert those who hadn’t had their eyes opened to the truth of Christianity. They began to adopt a theology of atonement through this mission. Atonement theology has a primary focus on the death of Jesus and how his necessary suffering reflects onto our lives. Through this rationale, the Christian missionaries were able to excuse their violent behaviors as a price for pagans to pay at the hands of God, turning Christianity into a colonizing tool. They justified their aggression as God’s will. Christians centralized suffering as an essential piece of their faith, and the perception of Christ’s incarnation changed drastically. The theology

1 Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 238.
2 Brock and Parker, 4.
3 Brock and Parker, 233.
of paradise that was held before this time revealed humanity’s likeness to God through the incarnation, while theology of atonement highlighted mortality and pain through Jesus’ death on the cross.  

The attitude of necessary suffering of those who are “called” to convert also began to affect Christians themselves. They started to apply the theology of atonement to their own lives, and viewed suffering as holy, or noble. They held the death of Jesus “as the supreme model of self-sacrificing love,” and wanted to reflect that love in their own lives.  

While Christians were taking it upon themselves to suffer in the name of Christ, a harmful narrative was built around the pain of those who love Christ, not the prosperity and joy of the life of a Christian. This sense of solidarity with Christ through suffering fixates on the idea that suffering is human nature. It becomes easy to brush off a situation that can be reconciled because of the communion of suffering with Christ.  

Presently, atonement theology has continued to excuse the persecution of minority communities at the hands of the Church. James Cone identifies similarities between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of Black Americans in his book “The Cross and the Lynching Tree.” He acknowledges the irony of a religious group that was born of persecution who continues to persecute minorities in the following hundreds of years. Cone also points out that white Christians lynched thousands of African Americans “with obvious echoes of the Roman crucifixion of Jesus,” and rarely contemplated the relationship between these actions and Jesus’ death. This racial inequality is perpetuated by a theology of atonement that today’s church still centralizes. The rationale for lynching Black Americans bears a connection to the glorification of suffering and the dismissal of Christian violence. Atonement theology fundamentally “places victims of violence in harm’s way and absolves perpetrators of their responsibility for unethical behavior.” Historically, atonement theology has played an active role in the suffering of Black Americans, and it continues to uphold systems of suffering even today.

4 Brock and Parker, 237.  
5 Brock and Parker, xi.  
7 Brock and Parker, xi.
Monica Coleman, another Black American, shares the story of her struggles with mental health in her book *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman's Journey with Depression and Faith*. She begins by describing her family history of mental illness. Her grandfather’s experience of mental illness resulting in suicide was deeply affected by the long history of racial injustice in the United States. Coleman writes, “who’s to know or care about the mental and emotional state of poor sharecroppers from South Carolina?”8 This history of stigma surrounding mental health, especially in the Black community, may have contributed to the way Coleman approached her own mental health. She suffered serious abuse in her childhood home at the hands of her father, and continued to feel the effects of that trauma long after she left the house. She also describes how her mental health and her faith journey were deeply intertwined. In her teenage years, Coleman was diagnosed with depression and began seeing a therapist. It was difficult for her to accept her mental illness because she thought she should just be happy. Her faith was renewed after leaving her abusive home, and she wondered why it wasn’t enough to heal her depression.

This is a prime example of how the theology of atonement was at work within her own mind. As described before, atonement theology emphasizes that suffering is a reflection of Christ. Coleman’s suffering of depression and bipolar disorder should have brought her closer to God, as atonement theology would say, and the shame she felt for not being happy through her faith is a direct result of this theory. Atonement theology excuses her suffering as “a cross to bear” or as a purifying exercise, which dismisses her from mental health care, personal awareness and understanding of her condition, and acknowledging that something can be done to make it easier. Atonement theology emphasizes the pain.

How would the experience of Black Americans or others suffering from mental illness be different if the church still held paradise theology as the basis of practice? For James Cone, maybe there would not have been a lynching tree for him to compare to the cross at all. Maybe there would have been justice and equality for people of different races from

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the beginning. For Monica Coleman, maybe her grandfather would not have taken his own life because his depression would have been met with compassion and care instead of cruelty. Maybe she would have been more aware of her family’s history of mental illness and had the opportunity to address it sooner. Maybe she would not have felt the shame that she did for still feeling unhappy in her suffering, despite her faith. Paradise theology would turn the world upside down.

While it is difficult to imagine the global church ever making the huge shift back to paradise theology, we can promote paradise for all within our individual lives. I believe that big change starts with small actions, and the decisions we make in our everyday lives can lead to monumental differences, even in the life of just one other person. We can choose to emulate the values of inclusion, equity, and universal prosperity, like the early Christian Church chose to strive for. Paradise is still an option; we just have to choose to live it.
Bibliography

